

Big Productions lives on, thanks to dedicated volunteers

Big Productions, the largest rural concert series in Montana, presents seven concerts a year in Ronan and Polson. It started with an idea proposed by one of the board members 26 years ago. The series has raised at least \$5,000 a year, and sometimes as much as \$12,000, for the (then called) Lake County Youth Home in Ronan.

In May of 2013, Big Productions was poised to present its 26th season the following fall under the capable hand of Chas Cantlon, on behalf of the youth home. Contracts had been signed, and the series would kick off, as always, in October.

Then, on May 29, the captain of the ship suffered a fatal heart attack. Many wondered if the series would happen at all.

However, although Chas had negotiated the contracts and booked the dates, it was his wife, Margie Cantlon, who made the tickets, brochures, posters, and programs, so a good part of the work could still be done by experienced hands.

Margie approached the board of the youth home – now known as the Cantlon Family Youth Home – and offered to present one last season, in hopes that a committee would come forward to carry on.

Word spread throughout the Mission Valley in the summer of 2013, and volunteers jumped in to preserve the concert series. Spearheaded by Trish Rodrique of Polson and Cantlon Family Youth Home Executive Director Brittany Cathey, the committee has taken



Big Productions planning committee members pose with Trio Voronezh after the group's March concert in Ronan. Pictured here (left to right): Brit-tany Cathey, Sergei Teleshev, Vladimir Volokhin, Trish and Mike Rodrique and Valerie Petrukhin.

on all aspects of presenting.

The transition began with Cantlon doing everything and explaining as she went along. By the October concert, volunteers had begun to take care of some aspects of the job.

At this writing, the WESTAF grant proposals have been submitted, with Cathey handling the negotiating, scheduling, and grant writing. Trish and Mike Rodrique attended the Montana Performing Arts Consortium conference in January, and Cathey will attend next year as well.

The March concert featured Trio Voronezh. Cantlon went to the first school program, but Cathey introduced the trio and handled all the outreach activities after that. For the first time, Cantlon attended the concert

as an audience member.

"Every aspect of the concert was handled by the new committee, which, by the way, has come up with promising ideas to grow the audience," she says.

The committee has stepped up so capably that Cantlon stepped away (retired, so to speak) before the end of the season. "They can handle the last concert by themselves," she says. "They've gone from looking like deer staring at headlights to looking and acting like the capable managers that they are – I am so proud of them!"

Cathey echoes Cantlon's enthusiasm. "Big Productions has had a wonderful season so far," she says. "It was evident from the beginning that the committee and the community were determined to keep the concert series going – not only because of the high quality entertainment it brings to our valley but, more importantly, as a tribute to Chas."

"It has definitely been a team effort by our entire committee to take on the roles that Chas and Margie did to run Big Productions," she adds. "We are learning quickly and are honored to continue the long-standing tradition of providing our community with a family-friendly and affordable performing arts series."



5



Meet up with
MAC on
Facebook

"Like" us for updates on Montana Arts Council activities and opportunities, as well as information for and about artists, arts events and organizations across the state: www.facebook.com/pages/Montana-Arts-Council/347466251951287.

CONDOLENCES TO ...

The family and friends of longtime arts supporter and former director of the Montana Arts Council's Artists in the Schools Program **Patricia "Pat" Kimble Simmons**. She died Feb. 8 in Missoula. Simmons was born in Chicago on Oct. 3, 1929, and grew up in South Chicago. A child of the Depression, the New Deal and World War II, she learned early that we are all vulnerable, and that we can take care of each other through our families, our communities and our government.

She attended Knox College in Galesburg, IL, from 1947-'51. Majoring in English and French, she began her career as a writer and supporter of writers as editor of the weekly newspaper, *The Student*. She met Don Simmons when they were cast together in "The Desert Song" at Knox, beginning a lifetime of shared music. She was an accomplished singer who sang in church, community and university choirs.

The couple married in 1951, and had three children: Elizabeth in 1953, Kim "JK" in 1955 and David in 1959. Over the years, Pat worked for the Army at Fort Slocum in New York, where Don was stationed, taught French in Grosse Pointe, MI, where Don taught public school music, and became arts publicity officer for Ohio State University when Don joined that music faculty.

The family moved to Missoula in 1973 when Don was hired to chair The University of Montana Department of Music in 1973. Pat loved Missoula, and Missoula loved her back. She directed the Montana Arts Council's Artists in the Schools Program, and designed events for the first Governor's Awards in both the arts and the humanities. As executive director of the Missoula Downtown Association, she promoted local small businesses, and created the "Out to Lunch" program, for which she was honored with the Missoula Cultural Council's Cultural Achievement Award. She served on the boards of Very Special Arts and Hellgate Writers, was a member of the Missoula Police Commission, and worked on the UM Foundation Business Drive, Leadership Missoula, and the United Way Citizens Review Committee. She received a Montana Alumni Award for her active roles in UM's Excellence Fund Drive, the Music Scholarship Benefit, Carousel for Missoula and the Missoula Symphony.

Alongside Don, she served on the Chamber of Commerce Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Friends of Flagship board, the Mo-Trans/Headwaters Dance Company board, and the organizing committee for the University Community Ice Cream Social, and was honored by the New Leaders Council and recognized as a "Rock-star" by Forward Montana.

Pat and Don were known as "Mom and Doc" by UM music students, and as "Missoula's grandparents" by the young progressives they admired who worked in politics and nonprofits. She advocated for children and the vulnerable, and was a beloved friend and men-



Patricia Simmons

tor, a storyteller and sounding board, and an inspiration, convincing young friends that it is possible to "continue to fight the good fight for a lifetime."

A Community Celebration of the Life of Pat Simmons was held April 19 in the UM Music Recital Hall.

– From the *Missoulian*, Feb. 16

The family and friends of journalist Betsy Cohen. She died March 3 of metastatic breast cancer; she was just 49. Her obituary in the *Missoulian*, where she worked since 1998 as a reporter, described her as a "hard-driving journalist, gifted equestrian and friend-maker extraordinaire, (who) embodied the candle that burns twice as brightly but burns half as long." Born Oct. 25, 1964, at San Diego Naval Hospital, she grew up in Amherst, NY, and headed west after graduating in 1986 from Hobart and William Smith Colleges, in Geneva, NY.

After a summer job in Glacier Park, she moved to Missoula, and earned a master's degree in journalism at The University of Montana in 1996. She immediately took a reporting job at the *Montana Standard*, where she covered government and the environment and developed a deep fondness for the community's character and characters. During her years in Butte, she partnered with *Missoulian* photographer Michael Gallacher, with whom she shared the rest of her life.

In 1998, she landed a reporting job at the *Missoulian*, and in short order, established herself as a valued and award-winning reporter, a veritable utility infielder, for the Missoula newspaper. She covered at various times business and the economy; higher education, including The University of Montana; public schools; and the police beat. She also worked on general assignment and, as an associate editor, fine-tuned copy and helped mentor interns and younger reporters.

In 2002, she won a reporting fellowship with the International Center for Journalists that allowed her to travel to Northern Ireland to track down Catholics and Protestants who, through the Project Children program, had spent childhood summers in Montana. She won the Montana Newspaper Association award in 2009 for best business reporter as well as the Best of the West award for breaking news; took home the Society of Professional Journalists, Pacific Northwest, award for best lifestyle feature in 2008; and received the Suburban Newspapers of America award in 2003 for best feature and the National Marrow Donor Program award for outstanding media coverage. She was a contributing editor to *Modern Arabian Horse* magazine from 2006-'08; an Education Writers Association fellow in New York City in 2007; and an International Center for Journalists fellow in Washington, DC, in 2002.

Cohen also completed the Missoula marathon and competed avidly in equestrian events with her beloved horse, Impressive Jewel. Her obituary concluded: "Betsy rocked Montana with her arrival and has done so again with her passing. No one, but no one, can fill her size-5 shoes."

– From the *Missoulian*, March 4



Betsy Cohen